

SERMON: 2017/08/27 - BTR

KIDS' TALK:

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front]

I bought this jigsaw puzzle from Walmart yesterday, and I haven't had time to finish it. Can you help?

[Take out a(n incomplete - one piece missing) jigsaw and attempt to complete it with the children.]

Finished! There, perfect.

[Wait for a child to point out the missing piece.]

What? It's not perfect?

Well, what if I found another piece and just stuck it on top.

[Remove from hiding another piece of a similar jigsaw.]

There you go! Done. *Now*, it's perfect.

[Wait for a child to contradict.]

It's *still* not perfect?!

But I got that other piece and stuck it on top!

What? It doesn't replace the one that is missing.

Huh. So having two of the same pieces - or even 3 or 4 - doesn't make up for the fact that there is a big hole in the center. *That's* interesting.

Let's pray: Father God, you ask us to give you everything. Help us to fill in the missing pieces of our discipleship, in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to depart]

You know, one of the things that really "stood out" to me about the USA when I moved here (from the UK) - *and disturbed me(!)*, was that whenever I saw someone doing something menial like working out-of-doors, 9 times out-of-ten they looked "Mexican." Again and again, whether it was the man cleaning the

toilets at the airport (when we first arrived) or the one driving the lawnmower for the big house down the street, he was not what you would call your stereotypical American: neither white nor black, and definitely from "south of the border."

And do you know: in the UAE - that's the United Arab Emirates - those tiny, super-rich nations - all of them modern inventions - that perch on the very edge of the Arabian peninsula, the skyscrapers that are popping up there - like mushrooms - and the fake islands being built in the sea in the shape of palm-trees or soccer-balls, are all being built by people from poor places like Pakistan and the Philippines.

Yeah, I read a report that almost *ninety* percent of the people living in those little countries *aren't* citizens: they can't vote or run for "office," they have had their passports confiscated, the police neglect them, refusing to carry out thorough investigations into crimes against them - they are abused physically, sexually by their employers; and they're trapped. And this is happening right now, today. [n.1]

And it happened in (ancient) Egypt too.

The Egyptians, thanks to thrifty men like Joseph and the fiscally conservative policies they implemented for the kingdom, became fabulously wealthy.

So wealthy that even the very lowest class - the Hebrews - those descendants of Jacob's twelve sons, benefitted. They must have done because their families became very large, we hear: the text tells us that they 'multiplied greatly' [Ex. 1:7]. And not only that, but they were also a 'very strong' people, which (likely) means that they were healthy and well-fed. (And later, of course, when they wandered in the desert following the "exodus," we hear them complaining, reminiscing of the rich food that they *had* enjoyed: 'the fish..., the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic...' [Num. 11:5])

*And yet* the system, despite being flush with wealth, was an unjust one. *Terribly* unjust, in fact: it was deeply divided along racial lines. One ethnic group - the "natives" - enjoyed privilege and status simply by virtue of their heritage; whilst another - Jacob's family from Canaan, became this vast, maligned, derided servile under-class [Ex. 1:14] - and there was no way for them to escape that situation (in their own strength): the whole system was arranged against them. This was *massive* structural, 'ruthless' [Ex. 1:13], unashamed racism through and through.

And God "noticed." [Ex. 2:25] He '*observed*' this outrageous situation [Ex. 3:7] and it upset Him: You know that (the prophet) Jeremiah speaks of our creator shedding "tears night and day." [14:17]

Why? Because the Egyptians had so much to give. They were the premier civilisation on the planet: the most cultured, literate, stable society (around), with good infrastructure, and roads and the rule of law, and a reliable bureaucracy; and even as they admitted the Hebrews to live amongst them and so benefit from their success, they also, *at the same time*, held something back. They just couldn't quite allow those "aliens," those "Jews," full access to everything that they enjoyed.

No, instead, they pushed them into a corner - Goshen - and just threw a few crumbs their way, and then congratulated themselves as to their high-mindedness; their charity.

But it wasn't enough. Not nearly. No way.

Because what *really* excites God is *generosity*!

That's why, as He explained to Moses through that flaming bush, 'I have come down to deliver them....to a land *flowing* with milk and honey'. [Ex. 3:8]

Not "dripping."

Not "trickling." *Flowing!*

*This* is our model! That we are to provide for His people - Israel, "the Church" - abundantly as He did. (And did repeatedly - including on the Cross.) To be generous, then, in every area of our lives: with our time, our love, our patience, *and with our money!*

It is wonderful to give of ourselves, but if I'm being generous with only one of the many things that I have to offer - such as with my juggling or my crocheting - but hold back in another area, *then something (crucial) is missing.*

Consider this: our relationship with our Creator - as Christians - is most often described in the Bible as being like a marriage. *This* is the most often used analogy in Scripture.

Well, imagine that you were married to someone who was generous with you in so many ways, but kept certain significant parts of themselves from you. Like they were a fantastic dishwasher, a good listener, physically tender and so on, but refused to share their passion for sports with you? Always bought a single season ticket. Watched games alone on TV in the den, night after night with the door locked.

Would you say that this was a *perfect* marital situation? No. Pretty, good perhaps. *But not ideal.* Rather sad, actually. And yet we are called upon, *repeatedly*, to give

ourselves as the perfect bride to the Heavenly groom.

Are we doing that?

Well, speaking for myself: only ever in part. By fractions.

But, as our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, said, after the tragedy in Charlottesville: "this is a time of decision". [n.2]

We must choose: will St. Matthew's flourish - and I mean "*really* flourish," becoming a self-sustaining parish, or will it continue to just "get by:" a fringe novelty, relegated to the periphery? A permanent "outsider" in this town? Each of us has a greater contribution to make.

Pray, my friends - and I mean that: reflect and ask for inspiration by the Holy Spirit as we approach "Thanksgiving." Amen.

Footnotes:

1. See, for example: Riaz, Maleeha (30th November 2016), 'A Culture of Slavery: Domestic Workers in the United Arab Emirates', available at <http://hrbrief.org/2016/11/culture-slavery-domestic-workers-united-arab-emirates/>
2. See: <https://www.facebook.com/episcopalian/videos/10157020411107925/>